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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 KUWAIT 001355

SIPDIS

STATE FOR NEA/ARP, NEA/REA, NEA/ENA, DRL/IRF, INR/NESA  
TEL AVIV FOR LEBARON  
RIYADH FOR TUELLER  
TUNIS FOR NATALIE BROWN

E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/26/2014

TAGS: [PHUM](#) [KIRF](#) [PGOV](#) [KU](#) [EG](#)

SUBJECT: (C) COPTIC CHURCH MAKES STRIDES BY MAKING FRIENDS

Classified By: (U) Charge d'Affaires John Moran, reason 1.4(d)

1.(C) SUMMARY: A/DCM and Poloff met April 24 with Father Bigol, one of three resident Coptic Orthodox priests in Kuwait, to discuss religious freedom issues. There are an estimated 65,000 Copts in Kuwait. Cautious and discreet, Father Bigol, who has served here for nearly two years, stressed the importance of maintaining a cooperative relationship with the GOK. A strong emphasis on affinity for Egypt and Kuwait, and a low-key, non-confrontational approach to resolving difficulties have helped the Coptic Church navigate successfully through bureaucratic obstacles and obtain a written GOK commitment to solve the problem of the church's required move from its current premises. Although the Coptic Church, like the other recognized Christian churches in Kuwait, continues to face challenges such as severe overcrowding, restrictions on assembly and religious teaching, and limits on the number of clergy and staff, it is able to operate openly as a church without interference from government authorities. The Coptic Church's approach of carefully respecting the boundaries of permissible activity while actively cultivating well-placed supporters, including a sister of the Amir, is working well. Such problems as the Coptic Church faces appear due primarily to hostility from some Egyptian Muslims. END SUMMARY.

#### THE PROMISED LAND

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2.(C) The St. Mark's Coptic Church was built in 1960 on a small parcel of land in downtown Kuwait City. According to senior priest Father Bigol, who, like his two colleagues, hails from the Anba Bishoy monastery in Egypt, the Amir had originally promised the church after its establishment that a larger plot of land would be forthcoming. However, the Coptic Orthodox Church has remained in its original location for the past 44 years. An estimated 65,000 Coptic Orthodox Christians live in Kuwait. In 2002, the GOK notified the Coptic Church of its intention to appropriate the church's land for a road expansion project.

3.(C) Father Bigol told us April 24 that the GOK has promised the Coptic Church a grant of 6,500 square meters of new land in Hawally district upon which to build a new church; the church had requested 5,000. He said that Sheikha Fraiha Al-Ahmed Al-Sabah, a sister of the Amir, has been instrumental in helping the church obtain new land. Father Bigol proudly gave us copies of several recent news articles from the local Arabic and English language dailies (the originals were prominently displayed near the church's main entrance) regarding Sheikha Fraiha's efforts to assist the church. (Note: Father Bigol explained that he and Sheikha Fraiha, "a nice, kind woman," had "become friends," and that she had offered her assistance in negotiating with the GOK on behalf of the church on the land issue. End Note). Sheikha Fraiha, accompanied by a small group of friends and relatives, even visited the Coptic Orthodox Church last week to offer Easter greetings on behalf of the GOK and the Kuwaiti people.

4.(C) Father Bigol told us that the church is waiting for the Council of Ministers (Cabinet) to formally approve the church's relocation to Hawally, and that the Council of Ministers was expected to discuss the issue at its April 24 meeting. He added that the church had received a written promise from the GOK, in response to a church request, that it would not be forced to vacate its current premises until a new church was constructed. He said no date had yet been fixed for the church's relocation, nor had the GOK offered any financial assistance to construct the new church, noting only that "God takes care of our needs."

#### MAKING FRIENDS OUT OF ENEMIES

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5.(C) Warmly welcoming but discreet, cautious, and diplomatic, Father Bigol was careful to emphasize the positive aspects of the Coptic Church's relationship with the GOK. While he acknowledged that the church faces difficulties (i.e., overcrowding, limited number of resident priests, no Coptic school for religious instruction, some

societal and bureaucratic discrimination against Coptic Christians on an individual basis), he stressed that a low-key, non-confrontational approach had helped the church maintain good relations. (Note: Father Bigol asked repeatedly for confirmation that no sensitive or incriminating information would be disclosed in the 2004 International Religious Freedom Report for Kuwait. End Note). On one of the walls of the main reception room of the church, in which our meeting took place, hung a photo of the Amir of Kuwait on one side and a photo of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak on the other. A Kuwaiti flag and an Egyptian flag were displayed side by side, along with placards expressing love for Kuwait and Egypt.

6.(C) Father Bigol told us that a few church parishioners have faced anti-Christian discrimination, but mainly from Muslim Egyptians, and that such discrimination exists "in all countries" and is not unique to Kuwait. Some municipal-level officials, he said, have sometimes dragged their feet in granting needed permits. However, the church's conciliatory approach has been successful, he said, in winning over a few oppositionists. In one case, the Coptic Church helped the wife of a problematic municipal-level official get a job as a physician despite opposition from within the Ministry of Health, drawing on the influence of Egyptian medical personnel in Kuwait. The municipal official, Father Bigol said, was so moved that he has become a friend of the church.

#### AVOIDING CONFLICT, DOWNPLAYING DIFFERENCES

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7.(C) The conversion of Muslims to other religions is forbidden in Kuwait. Known converts face harassment and discrimination, including loss of employment, police questioning, imposition of travel bans, and fines without due process. Father Bigol told us that the Coptic Church has declined to baptize Muslims seeking to convert, advising them instead to be baptized in Europe or elsewhere. (Note: A Maronite Catholic priest who leads the Arabic language congregation at the Catholic Cathedral adjacent to the Coptic Church told Poloff that the Catholic Church also routinely declines to baptize would-be converts. Several Arab Muslim converts, including two Kuwaitis, were baptized recently in Lebanon, he said, and now worship freely at the Roman Catholic Cathedral without any known harassment from GOK officials. End Note.)

8.(C) While Catholics and Evangelicals have engaged in modest, discreet, inter-faith dialogue with Muslims in Kuwait, Father Bigol believes it might do more harm than good (i.e., by accentuating and publicizing religious differences). Instead, he is focusing on dialogue and cooperation with the other recognized Christian churches in Kuwait with a view towards establishing a Christian religious council to liaise officially with, and present shared concerns to, the GOK.

9.(C) COMMENT: Even at home in Egypt, the Coptic Orthodox Church is a minority in a Muslim society. That experience, and the fact that Copts are native speakers of Arabic, mean the Coptic Church is adept at navigating Kuwaiti society. More than any other church in this country that we know of, the Coptic Church is effusive in expressing love for Kuwait and its rulers. In general, the various religions here coexist amicably although sectarian tensions do exist and a small radical Islamist minority is opposed to the presence of non-Muslims. That a sister of the Amir has so publicly taken a close interest in the needs of the Coptic community reflects Kuwait's pride in religious tolerance.

10.(C) COMMENT, CONTINUED: In some ways, the Copts in Kuwait, because of their minority status in their home country, may be willing to accept a lower standard of religious freedom than their Catholic or Evangelical counterparts here. The Evangelicals, in particular, have been vocal in expressing concern over lack of adequate worship space and, more recently, over compliance with the National Manpower Support Law's "Kuwaitization" requirements.

MORAN